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Study abroad blog: A comprehensive exploration into country and culture

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Study Abroad Blog: A Comprehensive Exploration into Country and Culture

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

by Kristin Zimney

Accepted by the faculty of the School of Media Arts and Design, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at JMU Honors College Symposium on April 18th, 2018.

I would like to dedicate this project to the town, the university, and the people of Salamanca, Spain for enriching me with their culture, providing me the most fulfilling experience, and enhancing my perspective of the world.

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Preface

This writing serves as the reflective/contextual essay component of my creative thesis project. My creative project includes a detailed study abroad blog with photos, videos, and translated interviews I conducted with Salamanca locals regarding certain aspects of Spanish culture. This essay details the workings, text, and video content of my study abroad blog, and is intended to inform on a deeper basis with supporting research, the topics covered in the interviews.

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Felix Wang James Madison University - Center for Global Engagement, Program Director - Semester in Salamanca

Study Abroad Blog Introduction

James Madison once said, “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance”. It is the beginning of a statement that I, along with many JMU students, read every day on the walls of the tunnel entering the Quad. It continues “and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives”. It wasn’t until I studied abroad in the wonderful country of Spain, that this quote began to make sense to me. Education gives us the power to change our own perspectives and teaches us to empathize with people who are different than us. To me, traveling is the best form of education. The knowledge that I gained abroad expanded my understanding of the country I was in, as well as my own country, and changed my perception of the world.

During the months of May-June of 2016, I studied at the oldest university in Spain and the third oldest in the world, The University of Salamanca. I created an interactive blog documenting my experience of the culture and my travels through text, photos, and videos. Prior to my trip, I created a list of topics I wanted to explore while enriching myself into the Spanish culture. Such topics include: Spanish politics, Spanish economy and environmental impact in Spain, and the differences in the daily routines of the United States and Spain including the Spanish tradition of *Siesta*. I conducted interviews with locals of Salamanca including host families, professors, and students and created short documentary videos detailed on my *Topics of Exploration* page. I collected, organized, and translated the material to be accessible to future students. By developing an interactive website of my experience, my goal is to encourage other study abroad students to document their studies, to take initiative and venture into the community, and to search for more knowledge than just the knowledge provided in a classroom setting. Combining my background in media, my passion for documentaries, and my minor in Spanish, this project serves as a creative exploration into the situation of Spain on a global level.

Study Abroad Blog Introduction

Below is evidence of my blog in which people can navigate through the 6 different pages: *About*, *Host Family*, *Local Culture*, *Excursions*, *Topics of Exploration*, *Weekly Reflections*

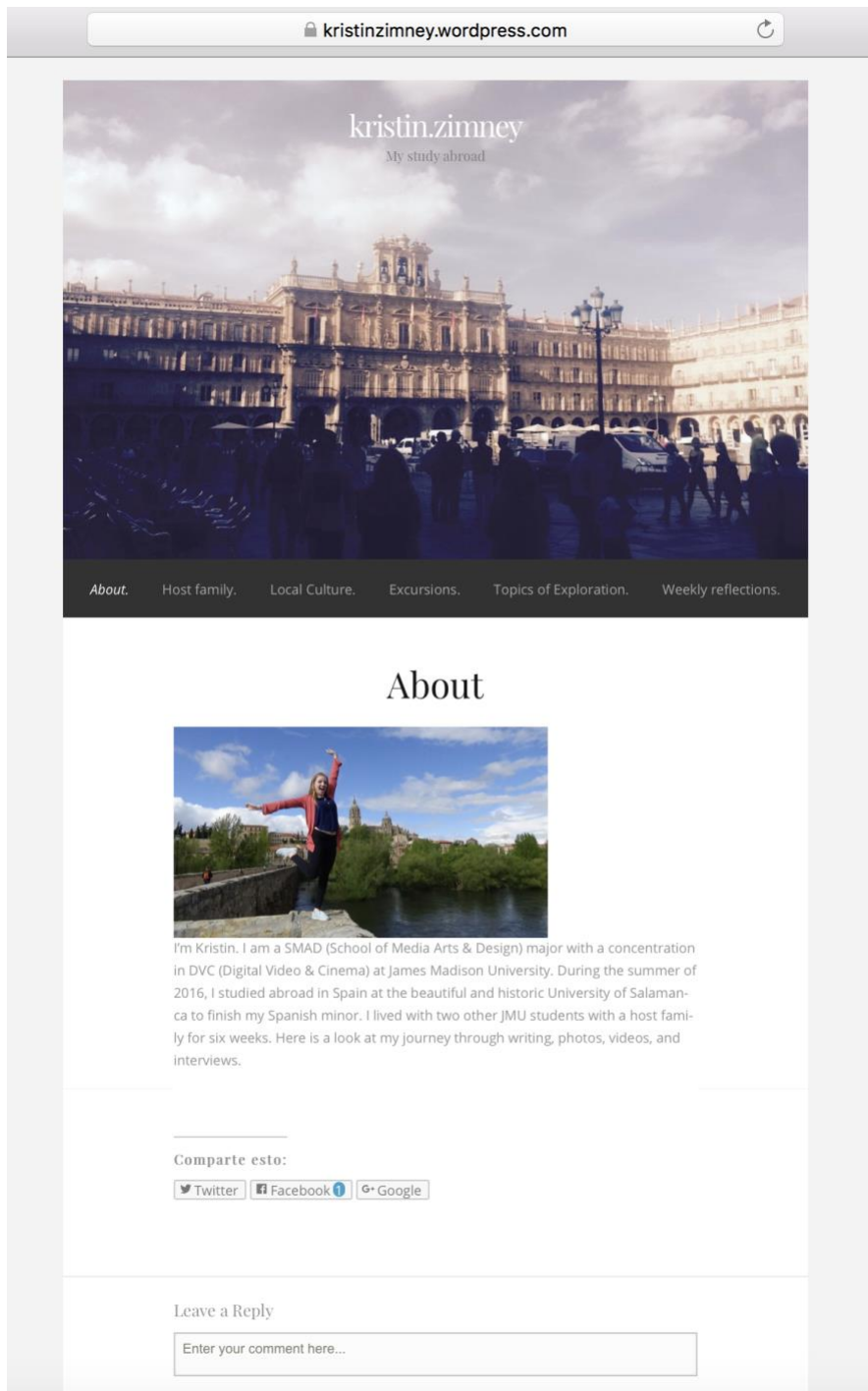


Figure 1.

Study Abroad Blog Introduction

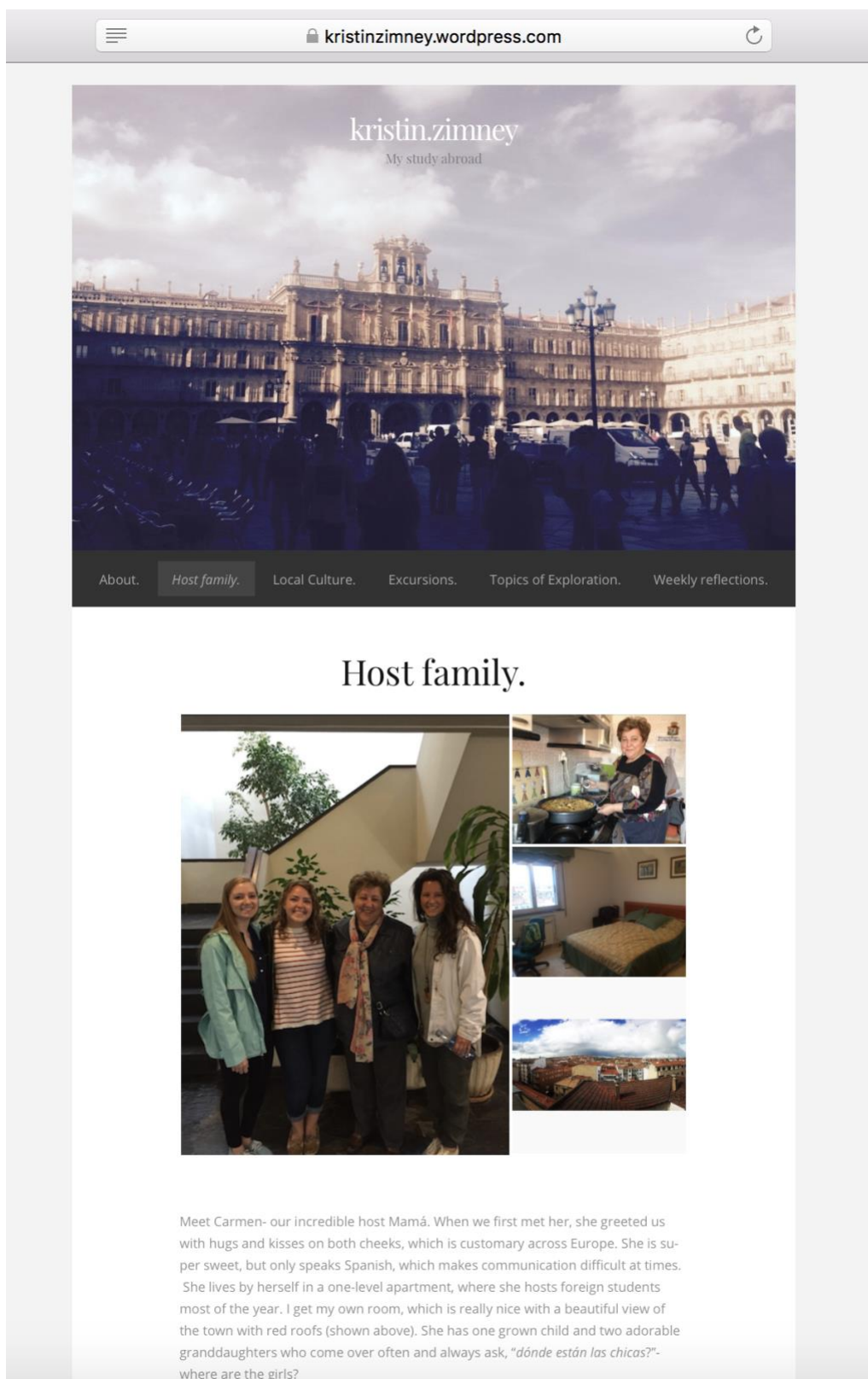


Figure 2.

Study Abroad Blog Introduction

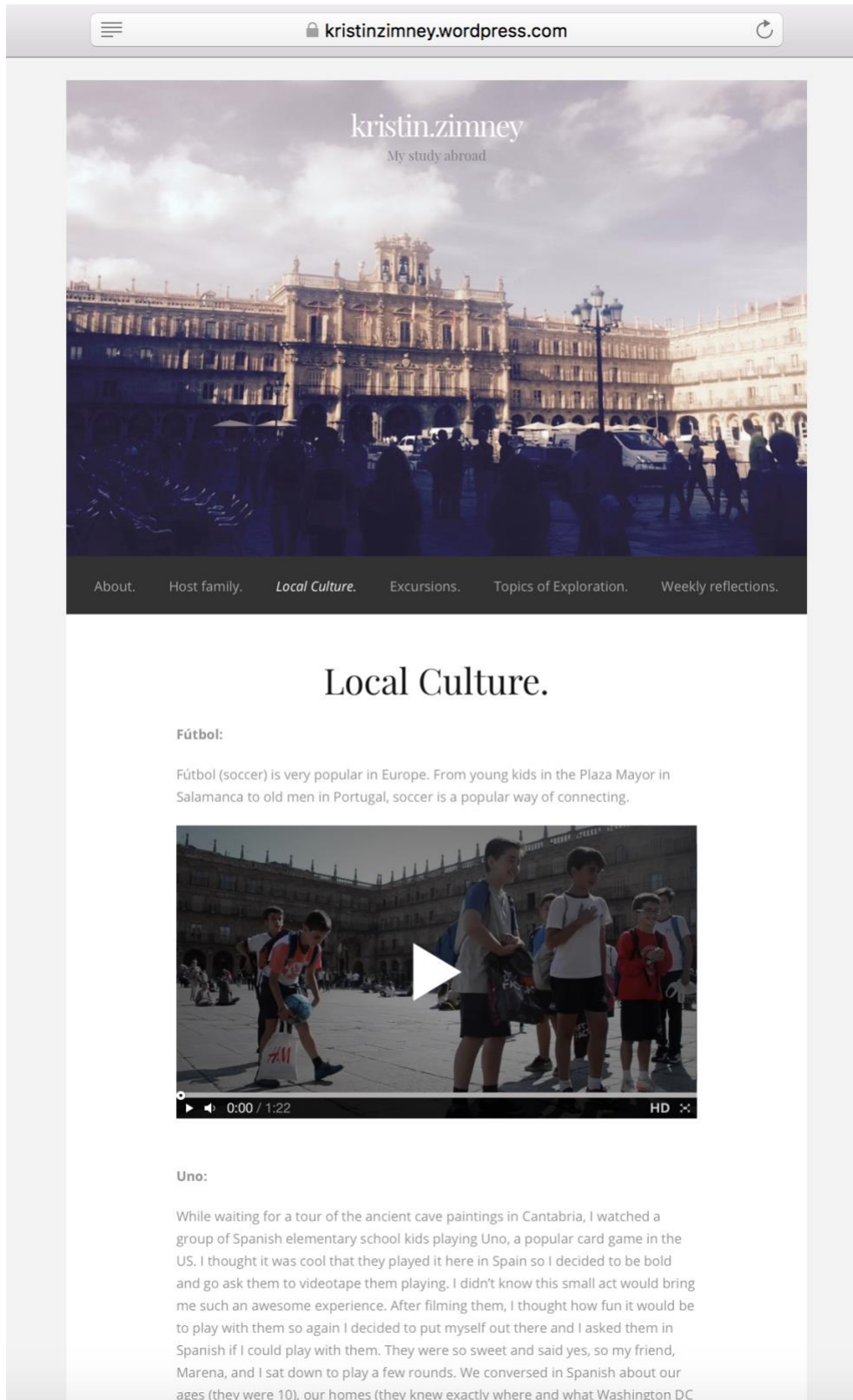
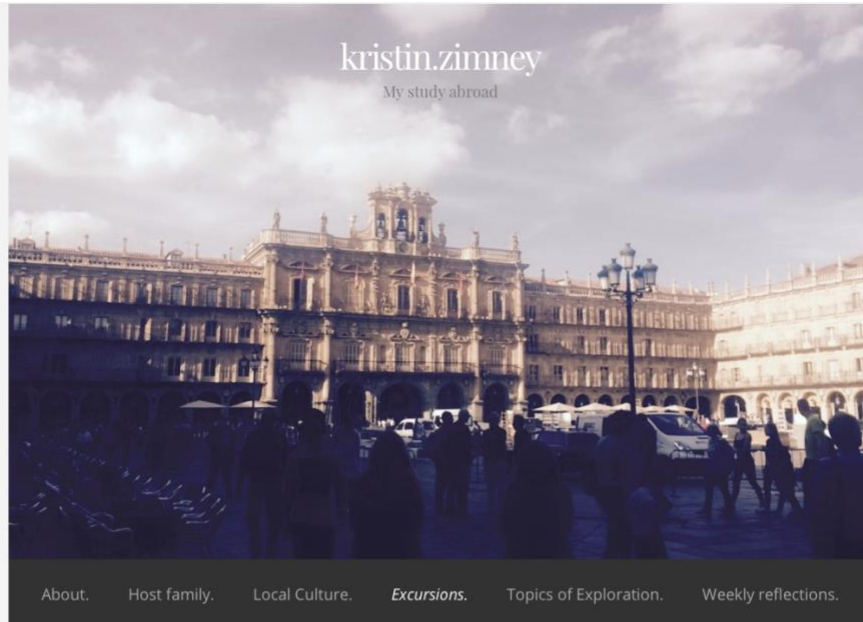


Figure 3.

Study Abroad Blog Introduction



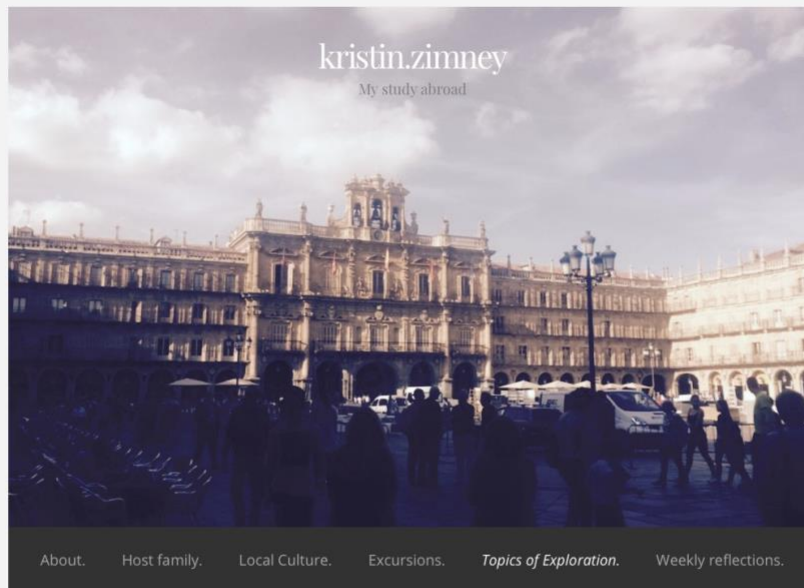
Excursions.

Short weekend trip to Italy



Figure 4.

Study Abroad Blog Introduction



Topics of Exploration.

Politics:



I am very interested in politics and I am fortunate to have been in Spain during election time in both the U.S and Spain. Not knowing much about Spanish politics before going to Spain, I decided to interview some of the local host moms, professors, and students of Salamanca about their own views on Spanish politics and ultimately, American politics. I wanted to show how self-absorbed Americans are in comparison to other countries and how little we know about foreign politics. No one in my abroad group really knew much about Spanish politics, but when I asked Spanish students about American politics, they could tell me much more. It was very interesting how much they knew about our election, our system, and our candidates. There was US election coverage on the news in Spain every day and throughout my time there, I saw cartoon drawings of Trump and Hillary on the streets of Salamanca, and even received offers for free shots at bars if I didn't vote for Trump. It was very telling that none of the people I encountered thought highly of him.

Since no winner came out of the 2015 election in Spain, they had to vote a second time. This happened to fall on the last day I was there. Throughout my trip, I learned a lot about the different political parties from the news and from my Spanish civilization class. One memory that really sticks out from the rest is of a certain candidate, Pedro Sanchez, of the Socialist party. Around election time, there was a video released of him shaking the hands of immigrants of color, and wiping his hand a few moments after the interaction. It caused a lot of controversy on the

Figure 5.

Study Abroad Blog Introduction

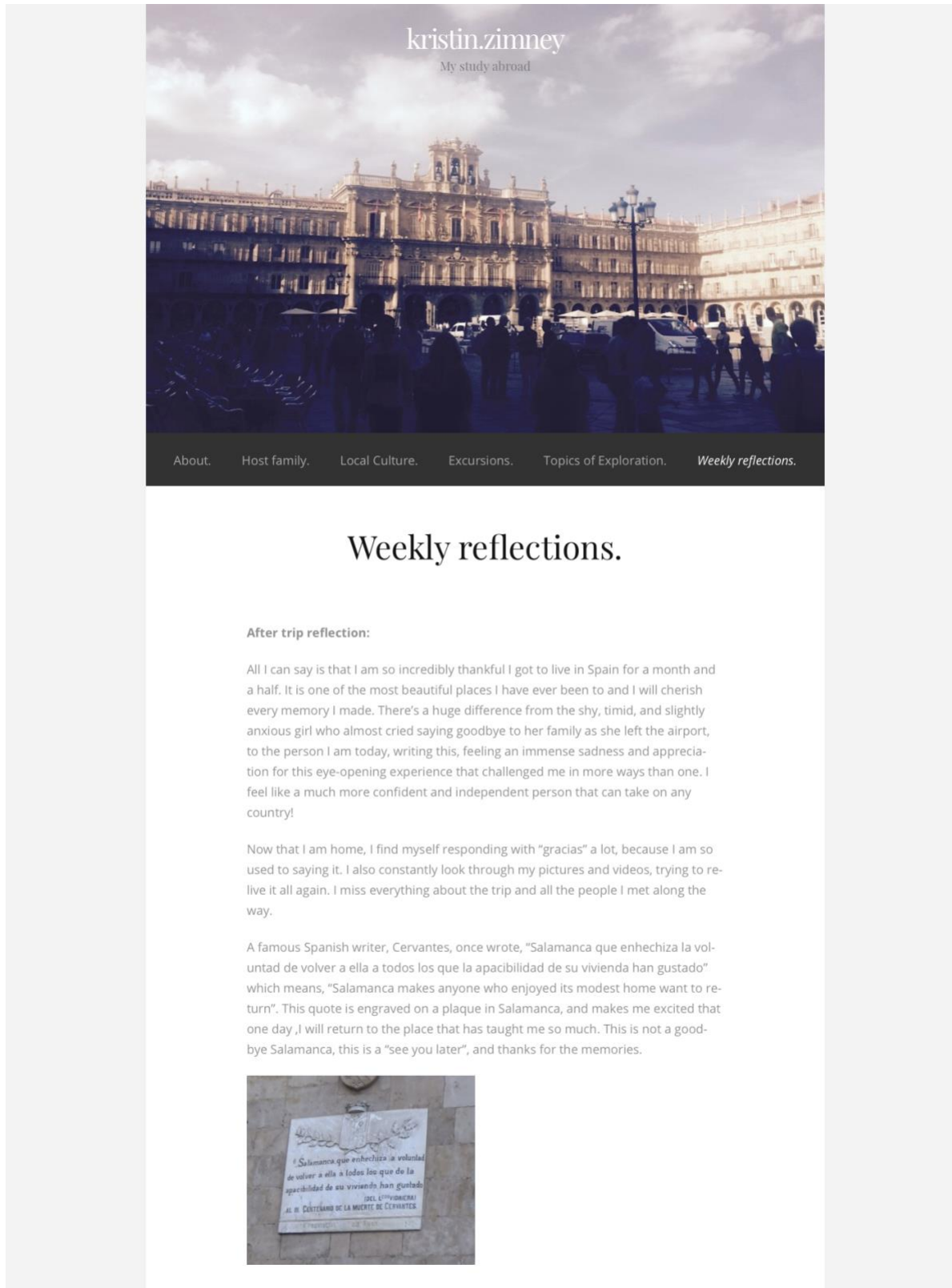


Figure 6.

Chapter 1: Spanish Politics

The first topic I decided to explore while abroad is politics. Figure 5 is a picture of my *Topics of Exploration* page on my blog with a description of the topic and my reasoning for exploring it as well as an edited video of the interviews I conducted. As a politically active college student, I was fortunate to have been in Spain during election time in both the U.S. and Spain. I knew very little about Spanish politics before studying in Salamanca, and decided to interview Spaniards about their own views on Spanish politics and ultimately, American politics.

Through my interviews, my Spanish civilization class, as well as Professor Tomás Regalado-Lopez of The University of Salamanca and James Madison University, I learned about the history of Spanish politics, the current political parties, and the 2015/2016 general election in Spain. To further understand the political culture in Spain, I interviewed a diverse group of Salamanca locals to understand the different perspectives. The death of Spanish General Francisco Franco in 1975 “provided the opportunity for rationalizing an awkward political system” (McDonough). This awkward political system was evident in the rare 2015 election in which no party won the majority of votes. It is interesting to note the similarity in political parties between the U.S. and Spain. Like the U.S., Spain has a bipartisan system with two main parties, one conservative called the *People’s Party (Partido Popular)*, and one liberal called the *Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party* or *PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español)*. In the last few years, Professor Regalado-Lopez explains, how alternative parties have been created such as the more liberal *We Can Party (Podemos)*, and the *Citizens Party (Ciudadanos)* on the conservative side. Since no party won the 2015 election, there was a second election which happened to fall on the last day I was in Spain. The interviews further reflect the idea that “ever since Spain lost its bid to dominate Europe in the seventeenth century, the country’s economic and social development has been out of synchronization with its capacity for political liberalization”

Chapter 1: Spanish Politics

(McDonough). Despite the numerous political parties, Alejandro Gonzalez, an assistant program director for international students at the University of Salamanca, describes the political system in Spain as a chaotic game, perpetrated by the corrupt politicians and the dissent between parties.

There was a clear influence of the American election in Spain and I was surprised to discover the depth of knowledge the Spaniards had about the U.S. political system. There was coverage of the U.S. election every night on the news, and cartoon drawings of Trump and Clinton on the streets of Salamanca. My *Spanish Politics* video begins with me asking American students what seems to be a simple question: What do you know about Spanish politics? After numerous answers of oblivion to a foreign country's politics, I decided to ask the same question to Spanish students about American politics. I was shocked by their responses, some from middle school students who knew about the 2016 election and past American presidents. I then interviewed host moms and professors about their political system and what they thought of the U.S. election. At the time of my interviews, the Democratic and Republican candidates had been selected in the United States. The majority of my interviewees seemed to be economically liberal but socially conservative, as expected in a very religious community. However, all of my interviewees expressed concern for then President-elect Trump. Professor Regalado-Lopez described Trump's political vision as "too radical" and emphasized the need to "avoid radicalism in politics, religion, and ideology". Alejandro Gonzalez said if he could vote in the US election, he would not vote for anyone, and said likewise of the Spanish general election. Comparing each country's politics, it is clear that politics is a complicated debate worldwide and a source of a nation's opposition and dissent. My video also reflects the naiveté of Americans (particularly American college students) regarding international politics, and conversely, the awareness of American politics by a foreign country, in this case Spain.

Chapter 2: Spanish Economy and Environment

Through my interviews and first-hand experience living in the city of Salamanca, I learned of the direct relationship between the environmental impact of Spain and its economy. The greatest threat to this relationship is the limited amount of natural resources which produces a decline in the economy. Throughout my time in Spain, I was exposed to the extent of how these two topics affect one another and what the people of Spain are doing to prevent this decline.

There are much greater steps and preventative strategies that must be taken in Spain in order to conserve the few natural resources remaining, than taken in the United States. There is a greater awareness of the cost of light, recycling, and reducing the country's carbon footprint. The interviewees in my *Economy and Environmental Impact* video discuss the habit of conserving water by cutting down on shower time and conserving electricity by turning off the lights when not in use. Personal experience was a huge wake-up call to the gravity of the economic situation in Spain. At the beginning of my time abroad living in a small one-level apartment with three rooms to one bathroom, I was surprised at the constant reminder by my host mom, Carmen Rodriguez Hidalgo, to turn off the lights when I left my room or to use the natural light from the window when I was doing homework in the middle of the day. It was after I did the research and conducted interviews that I realized the reason for these excessive reminders was due to the expense of resources such as electricity and the "great awareness about the cost of light" as mentioned by Tomás Regalado Lopez. Alejandro Gonzalez also describes the environmental and economic issues in Spain:

We don't have nuclear power plants in Spain, so our electricity comes from hydroelectric water dams. So if it doesn't rain, we don't have water, energy, or electricity.

Chapter 2: Spanish Economy and Environment

In addition to preventative tactics of conserving energy, the city of Salamanca contributes greatly to the cleanliness of its streets. For example, there are nightly cleanings of the streets of Salamanca with a Zamboni-like machine that picks up trash and sprays the streets with water. For trash collection, there are large trash bins throughout the city that dedicate certain colored bins to different types of trash, one for paper, one for plastic, one for organic waste, as shown in a snapshot of my *Economy and Environmental Impact* video below:



Figure 7.

Further research informed me of the disparity in resources between large, wealthy countries like the U.S., and smaller, less fortunate countries like Spain. For example, in 2013, the “total electric power consumption of Spain was 5,401 kWh per capita while the U.S. consumed a whopping 12,988 kWh per capita” (“Electric Power Consumption”). Although the United States does participate in similar preventative strategies like recycling, Tomás Regalado-Lopez who lives part time in both countries, argues that recycling in Spain is much stricter:

Chapter 2: Spanish Economy and Environment

In the U.S., [recycling] isn't a regular habit...there's not publicity or promotion of it like there is in Spain...In this sense, I believe that Spain is more advanced at a citizen awareness level. The U.S. consumes way too much energy between factories, cities, everyday life, and consumes an excess of energy per person, more so than any other country in the world...It's a question of domestic expenditure but it's also a question of respecting the planet, future generations and the environment.”

Similarly, Alejandro Gonzalez describes Spain as a country with very little resources like petroleum and discusses the need to take advantage of natural resources like wind and water in order to sustain the environment and as he states, “not have to ask other countries for energy and resources”.

As a result of the limited resources in Spain, Gonzalez describes the difficulties in finding job opportunities for young people as a “crisis that never ends”. The high unemployment rate of Spain is due to the “2008 global economic crisis [which] had devastated the Spanish economy” (Parra 129). In addition to the economic effects, there are also social effects “that have resulted from increased poverty from unemployment” (Parra 130). Gonzalez added that almost all of his friends have to go to other countries like Germany, England, and France to find jobs, “because in Spain they can't find the job they want or what they have studied”. Shortly following the economic crisis of 2008, the unemployment rate for individuals in Spain aged 16-24 was up to 55% in 2012 and an overall rate of 25%, “the highest level since Spain returned to democracy after the death of General Francisco Franco in 1975” (“Spain's Unemployment Rate”).

The preventative strategies to sustain the environment and the economy that I took part in during my time in Spain have continued well after my travels. Seeing first-hand how small actions can affect the environment and economy, and knowing how much energy the United

Chapter 2: Spanish Economy and Environment

States uses in comparison to other countries has activated a greater desire to limit how much energy and resources I use on a daily basis.

Chapter 3: Daily Routines: A Comparison of Spain and the United States

Before arriving in Spain, I had heard of a Spanish tradition called *Siesta* which means “nap”. It is common throughout Spain and other European countries, and consists of a long break in the middle of the work day for lunch and a nap. Not having an equivalent to this tradition in the U.S., I wanted to learn more and see if this cultural phenomenon impacts a nation’s daily routine, stress levels, and happiness.

Research has shown that there are many benefits to the *Siesta* tradition such as, “an important stress-coping mechanism that can provide protection against coronary artery disease” (Cheng). There has been a recent push in Spain to bring an end to this old tradition. Research into why this custom is disappearing argues that the expansion of cities and housing “adds a significant amount of commuting time to the one or two hours required for the *Siesta*... a time commitment which is often impractical in a modern economy” (Staw 368). I found from my own experience and from Salamanca locals that the *Siesta* is still prevalent in smaller cities like Salamanca where the majority of people live within walking distance to the main city center. Shops even close down for an hour or two, “traditionally because people would return to work afterward and work for several more hours” (Staw 368). In addition to resting, it is usual for people to eat a three-course meal during this time as Tomás Regalado Lopez says:

Lunch is sacred. It’s like a code that you have to eat at the table for an hour and spend a lot of time at the table. It’s important to eat, eat well, and rest, sleep during *Siesta*, and begin to work after. However, in the U.S., no. You can eat very quickly at 12:00 to 12:20 and return to the office. The rhythm of work is totally different and probably more relaxed in Spain.

Chapter 3: Daily Routines: A Comparison of Spain and the United States

He describes the daily routines of Spain and the U.S. as “a very important cultural difference”.

Gonzalez emphasizes the gregarious Spanish culture, “We are very social people so it is a necessary habit for us to have our free time to spend with friends”.

In contrast to this relaxed work schedule in Spain, the majority of Americans have an arduous 9:00-5:00 work schedule, providing little time for lunch. Along with the difference in work schedules between the two countries, the work ethic is another aspect of cultural difference. While I was in Spain, I heard the phrase “Americans live to work, Spaniards work to live”. Although the United States has an immense work ethic, we are known to take less vacation days than most countries. In my *Daily Routines of the U.S. and Spain* video, Tomás Regalado Lopez states:

It’s true that life in Spain is much more relaxing, but Spaniards also go to work and comply to a work schedule. This has been seen very clearly since Spain has been a part of the European Union since 1986. Like all of the major cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, Valencia, they have to coordinate the same time zone as Europe. I think that there is probably a religious base or reason for this identity. Spain is a Catholic Christian country where wealth was never well seen, for virtue of humility, etc. However, the Protestant culture is really different. Work ennobles, work helps development, and carries the majority of wealth”.

Host moms, Carmen Rodriguez-Hidalgo and Carmen Rodriguez Almodovar, emphasize that Spaniards don’t work to save the money, they work so they can spend it on vacations and enjoy their lives the best they can. Although Spain has a very happy and probably much more relaxed culture than the U.S., the unemployment rate continues to be one of the highest in Europe, producing increased stress for youth and lower educated individuals.

Conclusion

By conducting these interviews, researching another culture and comparing it to that of my own American culture, I realized the influence of the United States on the rest of the world. Alejandro Gonzalez states in my *Spanish Politics* video, “What happens in the U.S., more or less, impacts our scale”. This statement reaffirms the status of the U.S. as the biggest superpower, but it changed the way I perceive being American. I now believe that through our power, the United States has an even greater responsibility to advance the world’s agenda and provide resources to less fortunate countries.

My experience abroad and the development of this project has inspired a greater interest in international affairs. It was the initial spark of my desired career of documentary filmmaking, and to educate the world on social and political issues. My next project is a documentary in Guatemala that I will be creating this summer, with *Education and Hope*, a non-profit education foundation that provides impoverished youth with access to education.

My mediated project, the Study Abroad Blog, is something I will have access to for the rest of my life that details the knowledge I acquired because of my experience abroad. I hope to become a more informed citizen and to use the power of my knowledge, as James Madison once indicated, to create positive change.

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